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INDIANS IN THE LAND OF PLENTY.

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IN THIS SPEECH PREPARED FOR THE 1965 NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POVERTY IN THE SOUTHWEST (TUCSON, JANUARY 25-26, 1965) MR. MCNICKLE BRIEFLY TRACES THE TREATMENT OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN FROM FOREIGN COLONIZATION TO THE PRESENT. NOT ONLY WERE THE INDIANS DEPRIVED OF AN ENTIRE CONTINENT, BUT THEY LOST ETHNIC, TRIBAL, AND SELF-CONCEPT IDENTIFICATIONS. THEY LEARNED TO DISTRUST MOST FORMS OF HELP BECAUSE OF A LACK OF SINCERITY ON THE PART OF THE HELPER. ALTHOUGH THERE HAS RECENTLY BEEN AN UPSWING IN THE INDIAN'S DESIRE TO PARTICIPATE IN GREATER AMERICAN SOCIETY, THERE IS A STRONG COUNTER-CONSERVATISM INGRAINED THROUGH YEARS OF REBUFF. WHAT THE INDIANS WOULD LIKE IS THE CHANCE, THROUGH SELF-HELP PROGRAMS, TO FIND THEIR OWN EQUILIBRIUM IN AMERICAN SOCIETY, RATHER THAN BEING FORCED TO ASSIMILATE BY GIVING UP WHAT IS LEFT OF THEIR "INDIAN-NESS." (BR)

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INDIANS IN THE LAND OF PLENTY

Prepared for the National Conference
on Poverty in the Southwest

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D'Arcy McNickle; Boulder, Colorado

Now we have a word for it, and the word is poverty.

We can cross a cattle guard into an Indian reservation now, and know what to call the tarpaper shacks, the rags and tatters of clothing, the sunken cheeks and listless eyes.

In times past one might visit Indian country and hear it said that what one saw was in the nature of things-- that Indians were careless about appearances, indifferent to suffering (their own or their children's), and insensitive to hunger and disease.

Today we call it poverty, and we begin to realize that destitution carries its own symbols and it strikes all sections of our nation and all races and creeds-- and no one is immune to suffering because of some culturally conditioned response to pain and loneliness.

Let us look for a moment at this Indian segment of the national problem of want and deprivation.

The material possessions which characterized Indian life-- the number and variety of wordly goods which were considered essential to the good life-- reflected the economy of the area and the group. They ranged from the simple tools, weapons, and household necessities of the hunting or gathering peoples of forest and desert, who lived a mobile camp life; to the relatively elaborate village furnishings of settled agricultural and maritime fishing peoples. Famine could strike at any time, as today it may strike in any society where subsistence tends to be based on a single crop or a single pursuit and where foreign trade and exchange are weakly developed. But except for these acts of nature against which they had no recourse, the Indian people lived a secure though not a leisurely life. The Europeans who first came among them may have thought them wretchedly poor (as some were where nature was niggardly), but as Europeans who were moving away from the peasant's closeness to the soil into urban parochialism, they were viewing the Indian scene through their own cultural bias. Only a few among them would ever learn to live comfortably and at ease in the wilderness.

What happened after discovery and settlement is a familiar story and I hurry over it. In area after area the basic economy was first disrupted, then destroyed. By the time of our separation from England, not only were the hunting grounds east of the Appalachians fairly cleared of game animals, but the planted fields of the Indians were being appropriated. The process followed quickly down the Ohio river valley, paused briefly at the Mississippi river barrier, then with the discovery of gold in the far West and the building of transcontinental roads, swept across the Great Plains and on to the Pacific Coast.

As the resources of the areas were tapped, the wealth of the nation boomed, and while the nation grew to greatness, the Indian people were diminished.

The final major assault on the resource base left to the Indians was precipitated by an act of Congress, the so-called General Allotment Act of 1887, which was intended to hasten the assimilation of the Indians into American society. What it almost accomplished was the total extinction of the race,

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but short of that it guaranteed a future of deepening poverty for all but an unexpected few, who happened to be left in possession of valuable mineral and timber lands.

The congressional act accomplished this dire result by the innocent-seeming device of requiring tribes to divide their lands into individual holdings of a specified acreage. The acreage allotments were not of a size to constitute economic units (the Eastern legislators who drafted the legislation were ignorant of climatic and soil conditions in the west), and the lands not allotted were declared surplus to Indian needs, taking no account of children to be born, and were opened to homestead entry by white men. The individual Indian allottees were then authorized to obtain fee title and to dispose of their holdings. In the absence of other means of support, many Indians found themselves compelled to sell out at buyers' prices. This was especially common in the Plains states, where the tribes generally had not practiced agriculture and showed no eagerness to tear up the earth. Between 1887 and the mid-1930s, by reason of this legalized plunder, Indian land holdings decreased from 138,000,000 acres to 52,000,000 acres, and the area lost was generally the most desirable farming and timber land. During this same period, the Indian population was increasing from 240,000 to 400,000. It would continue to grow, reaching 500,000, stretching out to 600,000.

With this start, the descent into poverty was swift and inevitable. Children for whom there was no land for allotment, moved in with kinfolk who had land. Individuals who sold their allotments, followed the same course. More and more people crowded into available living space. Money for additional housing was not to be had. Range lands became overgrazed, farm lands were leased out for a fraction of their crop yield, timber decayed before it could be harvested, priceless water rights went undeveloped. The Indians lacked the capital and the skills to bring about the development work that would have produced jobs and community growth. They had to look to the government for assistance, and the government, until the 1930s, operated from the mistaken premise that the race would die out and relieve it of further embarassment.

The results of those years of plunder and waste are with us still-- they account for the statistics we recite today: tribes in which unemployment runs as high as 65% of the labor force; housing which varies from "poor to dilapitated:; earned annual income of less than $100 for many families; educational accomplishment, in terms of years of school attendance, that runs far behind the national average-- one tribe reports a median of 4.3 years of schooling; the average at death for the whole population is 42 years.

But this account would be incomplete and misleading if it failed to mention that the outlook for the Indians, as well as the conditions in which they live today, are vastly improved over what they were in the first decades of this century. Prior to the Roosevelt years, the Indian people seemed headed for annhilation, if not biologically, certainly as legal and social entities. The years of the New Deal stirred the conscience of America and the Indian Reorganization Act of that period provided some of the tools, and the basic reorientation of policy, needed to begin the long task of repairing the wastage of the people and their resources.

The Kennedy-Johnson administration has resumed, after a lapse of some years, the unfinished task. Funds for constructive Indian programs are greater now than they ever have been.

Let us now look around us and try to understand more clearly the nature of this Indian segment of the national problem.

The poverty which Indians know is unique in many respects. They were deprived of an entire continent, saving to themselves only the scattered parcels of real estate they possess today. Such deprivation led to economic

ruin-- to hunger, disease, and unwholesome living conditions. But that is not the true measure of what they lost.

Every society validates itself in the lives of its members. In its modes of organization, its value systems, its rewards and penalties, it must achieve a balance between the drives of the individual and the security of the group. Failure to bring about and to maintain a relationship that allows individual growth within an acceptable moral order can only lead in time to the dissolution of the society. The process is fluid and creative and ongoing. Men may move into new environments-- as they must have moved constantly in the New World before the European settlements were made; thsy may acquire new resources and new technologies-- as happened when the horse came to the Plains Indians. Whatever the challenge or the opportunity, the social forms must adapt to men's changing circumstances. The Apachean people moving out of a nomadic hunting economy in the far north to become the historic Navajo and Apache tribes as we know them, experienced, as we must imagine, radical alterations in their modes of livelihood, their technology, their religious-ceremonial life, their kinship system, to some extent even in their language; and we must also imagine that the norms of acceptable behavior, the institutions which channeled individual energy, and the values which operated within the group must have changed as radically, and approximately at the same tempo, as all these circumstances required. They were going concerns and still in the process of radical change when the white man encountered them in the Southwest.

Indian tribal society was everywhere in this state of dynamic balance when Europeans reached the New World. Adaption had been made to every kind of environment, from Arctic tundra to desert wastes, with appropriate tools and skills. It was not a static world, since trade routes and war roads were traveled up and daown and across the continent. As recent studies suggest, it was a world in which in each tribal area the uses of plant and animal life were fully realized, often in quite sophisticated ways.

The taking of the land itself, first along the Atlantic seaboard, was a stunning blow, since it catapulted tribes on collision courses with neighboring tribes, and in time these shock waves reached to the far ends of the continent. But the mortal blows were those that struck at the equilibrium of group and family life, that made it increasingly difficult for the individual to live out an orderly life and for the organized group to function in expected ways. When leaders lose control, when the elders lose the respect of the young, any society is in for trouble.

Having been forced to yield its broad territorial base and the freedom to move laterally when the land became overcrowded or blighted by drought (as happened cyclically in the Southwest), Indian society is now threatened with loss of the freedom to move forward in time.

What is most disturbing about this threat-- and here we bring the focus of these remarks upon the Southwestern tribes, where Indian society retains so much of its tradition and custom-- is the implication that Indians cannot survive <u>as Indians</u>, that only by yielding the last vestiges of autonomy can they expect to share in the wealth which grew from their ancestral soil. The threat has been sharp and explicit at times; disavowed at other times, as in the present administration; but it may come again, in the blunt language of congressional acts or administrative decisions. Indians have learned how quickly the winds of policy can shift.

So great is their distrust, and so great the desire to conserve a viable Indian society, that some groups, notably the Rio Grande and western Pueblos, have for years maintained stout barriers against the outside world. These barriers take many forms, some of them obscure and carefully disguised, others openly proclaimed. Marriage with an outsider, for example, is often cause for

eviction from the pueblo. Voting in state and national elections, until recently, was universally discouraged. The introduction of electrical power, running water, the telephone, and other "necessities" of modern living is flatly opposed in some instances.

While these arbitrary restraints often work hardship on the individual who would prefer greater freedom of action, or just greater comfort in his living arrangements, a more serious effect is the internal discord which erupts as a result of these and other pressures. The pressures come from many sides: from public agencies with their program requirements; from a changing economy which has seen cash transactions replace for most part the familiar bartering practices; from missionary groups seeking converts; from an encroaching materialism, and from a generalized American insistence on conformity. Leadership within the groups is often paralyzed by the splits and factional quarrels which drive the people apart.

The urge to participate more fully and more effectively in American society runs strong in Indian groups; but in each group also there is an unconscious, at times deliberate, holding back from complete commitment. The individual finds it exceedingly difficult to break away from the group and make a permanent place for himself in an urban center. A young Indian leader who participated in the American Indian Capital Conference on Poverty in Washington last spring, made this observation:

". . . it must be recognized that while the dominant American society has achieved fantastic material well-being, it has not achieved peace of mind and it has not found the solution to the ills of a mass society, including crimes, divorce, poverty, desecration of natural beauty, and destruction and waste of natural resources."

What Indians would most prefer is an opportunity, fully implemented by public understanding and support, to work out answers to their problems which would have a basis in their own social experiences, traditions, and value systems. People who placed a high premium om bravery, generosity, respect for age and wisdom, and a deep response to beauty should find it possible to move into the future, bringing something from the past with them.

If programs to eradicate poverty in the nation are to benefit the Indian people)and not constitute just another pressure), they should start with the people and be closely attuned to the non-aggressive, non-clamorous voices in which they will speak their views.